

THE MANGER IS EMPTY – Christmas Eve
Written by Walter Wangerin

My daughter wept on Christmas. How can I comfort her?

This is what happened: It is the custom of our congregation to gather on the Sunday evening before Christmas – adults, youth, and children –to go out into the cold December night, and to carol to the elderly of our church. A common custom with little unusual ever happening.

We went one such Sunday evening, December the 20th, through a snowless dark to Saint Mary's Hospital.

We divided ourselves among the rooms and carried our caroling to those members who were patients there.

And I, along with my daughter Mary and Dee Dee and Tim Moore and a handful of the other children who sang in the choir, slipped finally into Odessa William's room to sing to her.

She had a curtain pulled round her bed, therefore, we had to stand close to her.

And though the light was dim at the bedside, we could see the old lady's face.

The sight made the children solemn and quiet.

Her brown cheeks had turned to parchment and were sunken, her temples were scalloped, and hair and arms were too thin and her nails too long.

Odessa was dying of cancer.

This was the first time that the children had met her.

They gazed, and they waited for me to lead them.

Odessa for her part said nothing but just stared back at them.

"Sing," I said to the children. "Y'all gone munching on your tongues? Sing the same as you always do. Sing for Miz Williams."

And they did.

One by one they sang the carols everyone knew.

One by one they relaxed, and their faces melted, and I saw that my Mary's eyes went bright and sparkled—and she smiled.

She was smiling on Odessa Williams. The children gave the lady an innocent concert, as clean and light as snow.

Odessa, too, began to smile.

For that smile, for the gladness in an old lady's face, I whispered, "Dee Dee, sing 'Silent Night' once more."

She sang and the rest of the children unconsciously hummed and harmonized with her, and they began to sway together, and for a moment they lost themselves in the song.

Yet Odessa found them. The children stopped and waited for Odessa and she didn't disappoint them. For she began, in a low and husky voice, to talk.

No, Odessa preached.

“Oh, choir, you my children for sure, every las’ one of you.
And listen me. You the bes’, babies!”

The children gazed at her, and the children believed her absolutely,
and my Mary, too, believed what she was hearing, heart and soul.

“Listen me,” Odessa said. “When you sing, wherever you go to sing,
whoever’s sittin’ down in front of you when you sing—I’m there with
you.

And how can I say such a mackulous thing?”

She lowered her voice.

“Why, ‘cause we in Jesus. Babies, we be in Jesus, old
ones, young ones, us and you together.

Jesus keep us in his bosom, and Jesus, no—he
don’t never let us go. Never. Never. Not ever—”

So spoke Odessa with such conviction and with such a determined love for
children whom she’d never met till now.

These same children rolled tears from their wide—open eyes, and
they were not ashamed.

And my Mary’s eyes I saw to glisten.

The lady had won my daughter.

In that holy moment, so close upon the Holy Day, so brief and
so lasting at once, Mary came to love Odessa Williams
completely.

THREE DAYS BEFORE CHRIST’S BIRTHDAY, Odessa dined.

She died that Tuesday, the twenty—second of December.

The funeral was set for 11 in the morning, Thursday, the twenty—fourth.

Not brutally, but somewhat hastily at lunch on Wednesday, I told my
children that Miz Williams had died.

This was not an uncommon piece of news for me to bear them.

Mary, I barely noticed, ceased eating. I wiped my mouth and rose
from the table.

Mary stopped me briefly with a question and a statement.
Staring at her soup, she asked: “Is it going to snow
tomorrow?”

I said, “I don’t know, Mary.”

And she said, “I want to go to the funeral.”

THURSDAY CAME GREY and hard and cold and windless.

⇒ It gave a pewter light.

⇒ It made no shadow.

⇒ The sky was sullen, draining color even from the naked trees.

I walked to church.

How still was all the earth around me.

I put on my robe, ten minutes to the hour.
And then I stand at the back of the church and greet people.
And so it was that I met my Mary at the door.
“Mary?” I said. “Are you coming in?”

“Dad,” she whispered earnestly, as though it were a dreadful secret, “it’s snowing.”
“Dad,” Mary repeated, gazing at me, and now it was a grievous voice
- “It’s snowing!”
“Come, Mary. We haven’t much time. Come in.”

My daughter and I walked down the aisle to the front where the casket was.
She was eight years old, then.

Mary slowed and paused at the casket and murmured, “Oh, no.”
She reached out and touched Odessa’s long fingers, “Oh, no,” she
whispered.

Mary looked at me, and did not blink, but she began to cry.
“Dad,” she whispered “Miz Williams is so cold. Dad, it’s snowing in
Miz Williams’ grave!”

All at once Mary buried her face in my robes, and I felt the pressure
of her forehead and all her grief against my chest—and I was a father
again, and my own throat swallowed and my eyes burned.

“Dad,” sobbed Mary. “Dad, Dad, it’s Christmas Eve!”

These were the tears.
These were the tears my daughter cried at Christmas.
God in heaven, what do I say to tears like these?

It is death my Mary met.
It’s the end of things, that things have an end, good things, kind
and blessed things, things new and rare and precious; that
people die; that Odessa Williams; the fierce old lady who seized
the heart of my Mary is dead.
What do I say to the heart of my daughter?

I knelt down. I took Mary’s streaming face between my hands.
But she so pierced me with the questions in her eyes that I couldn’t
look at her, and I gathered her to myself, and I held her tightly, I held
her hard, until I’d wrung the sobbing from her body; and I released
her.

I watched her go back down the aisle and turn into a pew and sit.
It was a silent Mary who went.
She sat by her mother, but she asked no questions any more.

IT IS THE CUSTOM OF OUR FAMILY to open our gifts late Christmas Eve.

But that private custom of ours depends upon another custom of the congregation; we would not open the gifts until first we'd participated in the children's Christmas service at church.

This service gave me the greatest hesitation, because my Mary was to be the Mary in it.

Could she accomplish so public a thing in so private a mood?

I asked her, "Mary, do you think we should get another Mary?"

Slowly she shook her head, "No," she said. "I'm Mary."

The church sanctuary was full of a yellow light and noise, transfigured utterly from the low, funeral whisper of the morning.

⇒ People threw back their heads and laughed.

⇒ Parents chatted.

⇒ Children darted, making ready for their pageant.

But Mary and I moved through them unnoticed and unnoticing. I was filled with her sorrow. She seemed simply empty.

In time the actors found their proper places, and the glad pageant began.

"My soul," said Mary, both Marys before a little Elizabeth—but she said it so quietly that few could hear and my own heart yearned for her—she went on: "magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

And so, I thought, the child is surviving. But she is not rejoicing.

⇒ The angels came and giggled and sang and left.

⇒ A decree went out.

⇒ Another song was sung.

And then three moved onto the platform: Joseph and Mary and one other child to carry the manger, a wooden trough filled with old straw and a floppy doll.

The pageant proceeded, but I lost it entirely in watching my daughter.

For Mary began to frown fiercely on the manger in front of her—not at all like the proud and beaming parent she was supposed to portray.

At the manger, she was staring, which stood in precisely the same spot where Odessa's casket had sat that morning; and one was open as the other had been, and each held the figure of a human.

Mary frowned so hard at it that I thought she would break into tears again, and my mind raced over things to do when she couldn't control herself any more.

But Mary did not cry.

While shepherds kept watch over their flocks by night, my Mary played a

part that no one had written into the script.
The girl reached into the manger and touched the doll, thoughtfully.
(What, I wondered, are you thinking?)

Then as though it was a decision, she took the doll out and stood up and walked down the chancel steps.

(Mary where are you going?)

But she carried the doll away into the darkened narthex and disappeared.
In a moment the child emerged again with nothing at all.

She returned to the manger quickly, and she knelt down and she gazed upon the empty straw with her palms together like the first Mary, full of adoration.

And her face - Mary, my Mary, your face was radiant then!

Not quite suddenly there was in the sanctuary a multitude of the childish host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest!"

But Mary knelt unmoved among them, and her eight—year—old face was smiling, and there was the glistening of tears on her cheeks, but they were not unhappy, and the manger, open, empty, seemed the cause of them.

(I thought, Mary, what do you see? What do you now know that your father could not say to the heart of his daughter?)

SHE SAT BESIDE ME in the car when we drove home. A sifting snow made cones below the streetlights.

Mary said, "Dad?"

I said, "What."

She said, "Dad, Jesus wasn't in the manger. That wasn't Jesus. That was a doll."

Oh, Mary: all things are struck real for you now. It was a doll indeed. So, death, Odessa's death, revealed realities to you.

She said, "Jesus, he doesn't have to be in a manger, does he? He goes back and forth, doesn't he? He came from heaven, and he was borne here; but when he was done he went back to heaven again, and because he came and went again, he can be coming and going all the time, right?"

"Right," I whispered.

"The manger is empty," Mary said.

And then she said, "Dad, Miz Williams' box is empty, too. We don't have to worry about the snow."

The next wonder my daughter whispered softly, as though peeping at presents, "It's only a doll in her box. It's like a big doll, Dad, and we put it away today. If Jesus can cross, if Jesus can go across, then Miz Williams, she crossed the same way, too, with Jesus."

"Dad?" said Mary, my Mary, the Mary who could ponder so much in her heart. "Why are you crying?"

"Because I've got no other words to say," I said to Mary.

"Dad?"

"What."

"Don't cry. I can talk for both of us."