

## The Annunciation of Charles Spears

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"Your Angel stinks," said Timmy Ames and flapped off in his shepherd's costume.

The Reverend Charles Spears, Rector of the Downtown Church of Our Savior, thought he had seen his last Christmas pageant. The average age of his parishioners was seventy-three, and he had not had a christening in years. Then Dorothy Ames, Timmy's grandmother, suggested that the grandchildren put on the play.

"It won't work, Dorothy," he tried to dissuade her. "Grandparents can't control their grandchildren. That's the secret of the relationship."

The dowager empress of the Ames Machinery Company was not to be thwarted; the church's budget and Spears' salary depended on her munificence. Soon all the grandmothers were arguing over whose grandchild would have the speaking parts as Mary, the Innkeeper or the Angel Gabriel. Spears finally had to assign the parts by lot to keep the parish from splitting into factions.

Now, as one grandmother after another realized that she didn't have the strength to control a howling three year old, and the children quarreled and sulked and wailed, the Rector had to deal with a drunk. Entering the nave, he recognized the hunched shoulders silhouetted against the brightly-lit manger before the altar. Timmy's angel was a refugee from the Alcoholic Drop In Center, who came to the church for handouts after drinking up his disability compensation. The priest was wondering where he could ask him to sit to avoid offending the suburban sensibilities of his parish, when Mrs. Ames rushed down the aisle.

"Melissa's children are sick," she cried. "We don't have any angels."

"Maybe I could help out," the drunk in the filthy black raincoat said from the first pew.

Timmy's angel had a deeply lined face, yellow teeth and compelling brown eyes, framed by long greasy hair and a heavy gray beard. Dorothy Ames stared at him, caught her breath and gagged. He reeked of tobacco, perspiration and back alley wine. The dowager Ames stalked away.

"Was it something I said?" asked the Angel.

His shoulders twitched under his coat like a dog rubbing its hind legs together.

"Just, well, the children," the Rector said, afraid the Angel had the DTs.

"Don't worry. Bud," the Angel replied thickly. "I'll take care nobody messes up

their lines."

Stooped, graying, Charles Spears had that tired, strained, tormented look that Episcopalians value in their clergy. Unable to decide anything, he remained a bachelor at sixty-four, attractive to his septuagenarian female parishioners in the same helpless way as their hairdressers and their pets. Soon, however, the Rector must decide whether to accept the anonymous poverty administered by the Church Pension Fund or to continue a ministry in which even he had lost faith.

So Charles Spears walked away from the Angel just as he had walked away from every other problem in his life and went to the vesting room to prepare for the service. When he returned, the narthex was crowded with acolytes, choir members and elderly women trying to herd their manic grandchildren into line. If I take it just one minute at a time, Spears thought, I can get through this. By seven o'clock I'll be opening a bottle of cabernet and thanking God it's all over for another year.

Then the organ sounded the first chords of "O Come, All Ye Faithful," the acolytes raised their candles and crosses, and the procession started down the aisle. Following the choir was the cast for the Christmas pageant in the final throes of stage fright and excitement, twisting their hands away from their frantic grandmothers. The last thing that Spears heard before entering the nave was Dorothy Ames calling, "Don't you understand? There aren't any angels."

Spears was on automatic pilot through the opening prayers. Now all he had to do was sit, smile, and hope nobody forgot their lines. Right on cue, a nine-year-old Ames granddaughter mounted the lectern and began to read the Christmas story from the Gospel according to Luke.

"And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city in Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary."

Spears blinked as a spotlight illuminated a miniature Mary clothed like a Carmelite nun in blue habit and white cowl.

"And the angel came in to her and said . . ."

Time stopped. In the side aisle Dorothy Ames threw up her hands and grimaced; there was no angel. Spears was turning to signal the choir director to start the "Magnificat" when he heard something like a rug being shaken out, and a smell like wet dog enveloped him. He looked down into the nave. The Angel had caught his raincoat on his wings and was flapping them to shake it loose. Mary pointed where it was stuck, and the Angel yanked it free and dropped it on the pew. Then he knelt

before the amazed virgin. Heavy with dirty white feathers, his wings shuddered in the spotlight.

"Hail thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee," he coughed in a voice rough with tobacco and phlegm.

He was wearing green and orange plaid bellbottoms, oversize gym shoes and a yellow T shirt that said "American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists - Tampa 1999."

"Blessed art thou among women," he continued, and the ancient lines caught fire.

Clapping her hands, Mary jumped up and down and giggled. When it was time for her to question the heavenly messenger, the Angel had to whisper her lines and have her repeat after him. Mary was quiet as the Angel announced the miracle that was to be.

Another great silence. Who, Spears wondered, could speak in the presence of angels?

Mary reached out to touch the Angel's beard.

"Behold the handmaid of the Lord," she said. "Be it unto me according to thy word."

The Angel stood up, made a low sweeping bow and spread his wings. Like a tired fisherman rowing back to shore, he pulled himself into the air. The rest of the cast rushed forward as he was heaving himself toward the vaulted ceiling. Timmy Ames jumped up and touched the Angel's shoe before his Grandmother could yank him back.

"Go wash your hands," she snapped.

But he twisted away, and the show went on.

"And Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Juda, and entered into the house of Zacharias, and saluted Elizabeth."

The narrator stopped while Mrs. Ames sorted through the cast until she found Elizabeth. Just one more line. Spears thought, and the choir will sing the Magnificat, and the pageant will be half over.

"Say something," Mrs. Ames said to the terrified Elizabeth. The little girl looked up at the Angel, who was sitting on the crossbeam over the altar, panting. The Angel cupped his hands and mouthed the next line.

"Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb."

Behind him, Spears heard the choir standing up. They would steal Mary's best

lines, and a brilliant cantata would once again overwhelm the Incarnation.

"My soul doth magnify the Lord," a countertenor sounded from the rafters.

Before the director could bring down the baton, Mary answered, "And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior."

Then their voices blended in a wild, atonal wail as they shared the exaltation of Mary, the downfall of the mighty, and the coming salvation of Israel. Robes whooshing like deflated balloons, the choir sat down, and the director cringed at chords that had not been heard since Pharaoh's chariots capsized in the onrushing sea. This was not Christmas music; this was the paean of the daughters of Israel as they stripped the bodies of the drowned Egyptians. Then silence, the silence of the stopped heart, while parents and grandparents stared at the frozen actors, terrified that Herod's soldiers would appear to carry off the holy innocents.

"And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed," the narrator read, and the drama continued.

Joseph appeared with a cardboard donkey and walked around in a circle with Mary to signify the long winter journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Rejected by the Innkeeper, they sat down in the manger before a crib. As the shepherds emerged from the side aisle, Mary accomplished the miraculous birth by lifting the cover from a doll in the crib. Timmy Ames grabbed one of the plastic sheep from the manger and stepped back into the star lit field.

For the first time in the history of Christmas pageants, when the Angel appeared, there was real fear. Sliding off the crossbeam he lost his grip and bumped his left wing. The cast scattered as he tumbled down in a slow motion cartwheel and landed hard on the communion rail.

"Damn," he muttered under his breath. "That hurt."

"You're supposed to say, 'Fear not,'" the narrator prompted him.

Stubbed wing shuddering, the Angel stood up on the rail.

"Fear not," he said in a voice so warm and reassuring that even Timmy Ames' father, who had just been cited for driving under the influence for the second time that holiday season, relaxed. "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord."

It was the Angel's big moment, when he was joined with a multitude of the heavenly host. But there wasn't any heavenly host; there were just two shepherds and the Three Wise Men waiting in the aisle.

"Let's try something," the Angel said to the shepherds.

Taking Timmy in his right hand and the other shepherd in his left, he lifted off the floor like a ballet dancer, wings barely moving. They rose with the spotlight to the highest point in the cathedral ceiling where he released the two boys. For a second they hovered beside him, waving at their friends, while their grandmothers covered their mouths in horror. Then they lost their balance and wobbled back down like kids on their first two wheelers. The Angel sank onto the crossbeam and signaled the narrator to move on to the Wise Men. The spotlight returned to earth, and the Angel faded into the darkness like Giotto's angels in Santa Croce when the coin operated lights go out.

The rest of the service was almost ordinary. Reclaiming its place, the choir sang Stanford's Magnificat in C during the offertory. Spears smelled the Angel before he saw him at the communion rail and pressed the wafer into his tobacco stained fingers. He had put on his raincoat again, and as Spears moved on to the next communicant, he heard him slurping the communion wine.

The choir director wouldn't even look at Spears after the service. Most of the grandmothers stalked out with their charges without speaking, and the other parishioners reacted as they had to his one attempt to use the contemporary version of the Lord's Prayer.

"Nice to do something different once in a while, Charles" they said. "But not as a steady diet."

The only one who looked like she had enjoyed it was Mary, who waved her fingers at Spears as her father carried her outside to the car. The Angel was the last to emerge from the nave.

"Quite a team, weren't we, Bud?" he cried.

The Rector held his breath and turned away, only to see Mrs. Ames stalking toward him dragging Timmy by the hand.

"I don't know what you were thinking about with these children, Charles," she began before turning on the Angel. "And that was the worst Magnificat I ever heard!"

"Guess you had to be there, lady," the Angel replied.

"Where did you learn to fly?" Timmy asked.

"We'll talk about that some day, son," the Angel said.

"And we will, too, Charles!" Mrs. Ames snapped, leading her reluctant shepherd outside.

"Got anything to drink?" asked the Angel.

"Come on," the Rector said and led him to the elevator to his

apartment in the tower.

Spears always looked forward to Christmas Eve, when he could be alone with his wine and his memories. He had set aside enough food from the parish Christmas supper to last the weekend and had a bottle of cabernet waiting for him on the credenza in the tiny dining room. When he opened the door, the Angel followed him to the kitchen and took off his coat. He watched the priest take the roast beef and potatoes out of the refrigerator and put them in the microwave.

"Would you like a salad?" Spears asked.

"Can't tell you how long it's been since I had a salad," the Angel answered.

"Why don't you go into the dining room and open the wine," Spears said, handing him the glasses.

As soon as he was gone, the priest cracked the window and took a deep breath. He heard the cork pop in the next room.

"Ah," exclaimed the Angel.

When the priest carried in the plates, the Angel was holding a glass under his nose, inhaling deeply.

"This isn't the kind that gets you into the Drop In Center," he said.

"What's it like living there?" Spears wondered.

The Angel poured the wine and looked at him expectantly. The priest said a quick blessing. Then the Angel drank deeply and started on his dinner.

"Trouble with the Center is I have to wait until everybody's asleep to shower up," he said between mouthfuls. "Last time a guy saw these wings, they put him in the state hospital for six months."

The Angel refilled his glass.

"God, this is good stuff, Bud."

"Why do you drink so much?" the priest asked.

"Probably the same reason you do," the Angel replied. "You're part of something big once, and you think everything's going to change. But it doesn't, and you can't understand why. You know it really happened because you were there, but the years keep rolling on by."

"Like being ordained," Spears said softly.

"There you go," said the Angel. "Or being in the Army. Or for the women, maybe like having a baby. You keep thinking something wonderful will happen again, maybe to somebody else, you'd settle for that, but it's totally out of your control. So I've been waiting and remembering all this time and still nothing happens. I guess that's

why I drink."

"I've got some mince pie," Spears said.

"That would be great."

Spears went to the kitchen for the pie and stood by the window, inhaling the cold air while the coffee brewed. When he returned with dessert and coffee, the Angel was finishing the wine in the priest's glass.

"Glad we got a chance to talk, Bud," the Angel said.

"So am I."

The Angel followed him into the kitchen with his dishes and looked at the open window. Outside streetlights stretched across the downtown basin to the hills that surrounded the city. Only a few cars moved along the snow dusted streets. The night was silent.

"I better be going now. Bud," the Angel said. "They lock up the Center at ten o'clock."

They shook hands. To Spears' surprise, the Angel's hand was soft, as if he had never worked. The Angel picked up his raincoat.

"I'll let myself out," he said.

He opened the window all the way and climbed up onto the sill. Then he stepped out into the starry night.