

Joseph's Dreams

December 18, 2006

Frederick J. McGavran

When he arrived at the Downtown Church of Our Savior for the Christmas Eve pageant, W. Carlton Ames IV, "No. 4" to his intimates, was drunk. Two bourbons into the office party, between the iced shrimp and the egg rolls, he tried to restart an affair with a twenty-something from marketing. His mother had broken off their relationship after she encountered them outside a downtown hotel, hair still wet from noontime showers. In a merciless monotone, the dowager empress of the Ames Machinery Company explained to her only son how the power of appointment in his father's will gave her the power of wealth or poverty over him. Like most men faced with a choice between acting out their sexual fantasies and family fortune. No. 4 chose fortune.

Afternoon alcohol dissipated all restraint as he positioned his slowly softening mid thirties body before the hors d'oeuvres. The marketer, however, perceived him to be as irresolute in love as he was in business. So she snubbed him for the Swedish meatballs, leaving him with a plate piled high with shrimp, egg rolls and cocktail sauce in one hand and a double bourbon and soda in the other, unable to protest her rebuff.

Only a man with a mission could have driven from the company to the Church in his condition. Carl IV had a mission. In his jacket pocket were three tickets to "A Christmas Carol." Frustrated in his office adventure, he would assert his authority over his nuclear family as his father, Carl III, had forced him and his mother to accompany him to that sentimental spectacle of secular redemption. Following their act of obeisance, the patriarch, thick tongued with bourbon, would reward them with lavish gifts and teary expressions of once a year affection, to be forgotten sooner than the hangover.

Family honor as well as tradition was at stake here. No. 4 was outraged that his six-year-old son, Carl V had been selected to play Joseph, the only major player in the pageant who didn't have any lines.

If No. 4 were not so drunk, he would not have been able to make his way through the choir, folded in three coils in the narthex, past acolytes threatening to set the greenery aflame with their torches, searching for his wife and little boy. He found instead his mother arguing with Charles Spears, the Rector outside the doors to the nave.

"You can't let Jennifer read the Christmas story," Dorothy Ames was saying to the priest.

"She's dyslexic."

"She's the only one left who can read," Spears replied. "All the others are in the bathroom."

Five minutes before curtain time, the Christmas pageant was in turmoil. One of the Wise Men had brought the flu straight from kindergarten to dress rehearsal, and now the whole cast was reeling. Gone were the throngs of angels and the shepherds watching their flocks by night; even King Herod's soldiers had withered away. In one last shuffling of roles. Spears had found a substitute Mary and a four-year old strong enough to carry the cut out donkey for the Holy Family's flight into Egypt.

Mrs. W. Carlton Ames, III saw her son squeezing towards her between two large choristers.

"You're late," she snapped at him, disengaging from the priest. "Susan and little Carl are over there."

No. 4 turned away, and she stalked off after him. For one blessed moment, Charles Spears was free of the family that had dominated the church for three generations.

Then W. Carlton Ames, V yanked on his stole. In minutes the six-year old was to be visited by an angel to calm his alarm at his fiancée's unexpected pregnancy.

"What happened to your costume?" Spears asked the Oshkosh® clad first grader.

"We're going to some play with Daddy," the little boy said.

The one time the Rector needed Dorothy Ames, she wasn't there. He smelled bourbon mingled with tallow as No. 4 pushed his way through the choir again, holding his son's costume above his head like a trophy. The organ began "Oh Come, All Ye Faithful," the choir started into the nave, and the pageant unraveled. It would take a miracle to save it from bickering, sickness and drink.

"No son of mine is going around dressed like a terrorist," No. 4 said.

The Rector's expressive face froze. Angry parents, frenetic children and three generations of the Ames family overcame forty years of priestly self-control. Charles Spears snapped.

"Give me that costume," the Rector said to No. 4, taking the bathrobe and headdress from him and wrapping the boy back in his costume.

Carl V hesitated between his father and the Rector, then followed the cast into the nave.

"He doesn't have any lines," Carl said.

The priest took No. 4's face in his hands and looked him in the eyes.

"Matthew's Christmas story is about Joseph's dreams," Spears said. "Just watch."

The scion of the Ames Machinery Company was too surprised to resist. He watched the priest disappear into the half-light to the last chords of the hymn. Starting after him, he was disoriented by the candles and the enormous Christmas trees behind the altar that encircled the chancel like a forest grotto. Then his mother's angry eyes caught him like an intruder on a radarscope, and he sat down between her and his quivering wife. At least there won't be a sermon, he thought, closing his eyes as the seven-year-old narrator climbed into the pulpit to begin the pageant.

The microphone groaned as the little girl bent it towards her, startling Carl IV awake. Parents and grandparents and cast awaited the familiar words.

"But when Joseph heard that Archelaus reigned over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He shall be called a Nazarene.'"

Silence. Nobody moved.

"She's reading it backwards," Susan whispered. "That's Joseph's last dream."

She hurried to the front of the church, where she and another mother reconfigured the cast to play the last act of the Christmas story first. Carl IV was standing up to get his wife and son and walk out of the farce, when he glimpsed the Rector making the sign of the cross. An enormous screen like the video screens in mega churches appeared before the altar. Astonished, No. 4 sat down.

"I hope they didn't use our money for that," he said to his mother.

Like most Episcopalians, extravagance troubled him more than apostasy.

"Be quiet," she snapped.

As Mary and Joseph circled the stage with the cutout donkey to pantomime the journey to Nazareth, the screen came alive. A man in a long red robe with a gilded collar and an oversize gold laurel wreath was climbing the steps to a palace between two lines of soldiers armed with spears. When the man in the red robe reached the top, he turned and opened his arms to the crowd behind the soldiers. No. 4's chest tightened: an inscription on the pediment proclaimed "Ames Machinery Company," and the man in the red robe was himself.

Carl sat up straight, gasping. Some of the men behind the soldiers, the better-dressed ones, cheered and waved to catch the new king's eye. At the back of the crowd stood the marketer with some of her friends from advertising, pointing at him and laughing.

"This is unbelievable," he said.

"Just wait," his mother said, putting her hand on his arm. "It gets better."

"But when Herod died," the narrator continued, "behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, 'Rise, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel; for those who sought the child's life are dead.'"

No. 4 froze: on the enormous screen he saw himself as a waxen faced old man lying on his bier, surrounded by servants holding torches, while his adult son stepped up and snatched the golden laurel from his bald head. Then No.V took a torch from one of the servants and threw it onto the kindling. As the flames billowed around it, the corpse twisted and sat up as if it were struggling to escape.

"No" said Carl IV.

"Oh, yes," his son said triumphantly.

"I won't let that happen to me!" he cried.

"Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, was in a furious rage," said the narrator, "and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men."

The soldiers went from house to house, kicking in the doors and dragging out the little boys to kill them in the street. Their mothers struggled to protect them, but as the old king watched from his chariot, the swordsmen ripped the babies free.

"Yes," breathed the scion of the Ames Machinery Company. "If that's what it takes, that's what it takes."

Then he saw his own son snatched away from his wife and thrown into the dirt. An indifferent soldier raised his sword.

"This is what it takes," the man in the chariot said.

"No!" Carl cried. "What have I done?"

Then he saw his son as a young man, leading a donkey with Mary and her baby across a sand dune silhouetted against the high desert stars.

"Now when the wise men had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.'"

"Thank God they made it," whispered Carl IV.

"Be quiet," his mother said.

His son and Mary were taking their places for the now climactic scene where the angel

appears to explain the unplanned pregnancy threatening their engagement. Joseph is speechless; the five-year-old Mary doesn't have a clue. Only God could make it right.

"But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'"

Then the hot tears streamed down his cheeks, as they had so unexpectedly at Carl V's birth, when he stood beside his exhausted wife and saw the blood smeared baby cry out for his first breath. Why had that moment, so lost in the lusts and terrors of the Ames Machinery Company, returned to overwhelm him now? Wiping his eyes, he searched the bleary stage for his son and saw instead the deep brown eyes of the angel staring straight at him. Who could question God before such eyes? The face was familiar; it was the face of the young man leading the donkey, the face that would someday be his son's.

"Can I still make it up to him?" Carl said. "What time is it?"

"Just give me a minute to get everyone out to their cars," Charles Spears replied.

He was wearing his frayed tweed jacket again, and the church was nearly empty. All the candles were out, and only the sexton moved among the pews, picking up discarded programs. The Rector touched Carl's shoulder and walked away up the aisle. Instead of credits at the end of the film, a bearded man with two sets of shimmering wings and an enormous scroll appeared on the screen.

"Let me give you a ride home," Charles Spears said. "They'll be waiting for you."

"My car," said No. 4.

"We'll worry about that tomorrow," the priest replied. "Come on."

Like a disoriented initiate in a catacomb, No. 4 followed the priest to the basement of the dark church and through a metal door into the underground parking garage next door. A metal gate rose, and they drove up the ramp onto a snow dusted downtown street. The flurries softened the nighttime noises, and through the clouds, the stars were as close and bright as they were to the desert travelers two thousand years before.

"Joseph was the only one who saw the angel," No. 4 said.

"That's right," Spears agreed. "In Matthew's Gospel, the annunciation is to Joseph, not to Mary."

He turned onto the expressway. It was empty except for one forlorn truck in the far right lane crawling up the hill out of the city.

"He had those wonderful visions, but he never said anything," Ames continued, still arguing with himself.

"I think he was a mystic, Carl," the priest replied, beginning to sense what had happened.

"I thought mystics were just visionaries. But Joseph acted on his dreams."

"That's what sets him apart," said Spears.

"And then he just disappears," Carl said softly, remembering the vision of himself on his bier.

"What more can a man do than raise his children well, then step aside," the Rector said.

They drove in silence to the exit to the suburb where the rest of the Ames family was celebrating Christmas.

"Who is the man with the two sets of wings?" Carl asked as they turned onto the street to his house.

Spears glanced at him.

"That's the symbol for St. Matthew," he said slowly. "Where did you see him?"

"On the screen in front of the altar. How long have you had that?"

The Rector was about to say, "There isn't any screen in front of the altar," but he caught himself.

"Only on Christmas Eve," he said instead.

So the ancient words still enticed the angels to descend to see who else was listening. He turned into the circular driveway to the Ames home and stopped by the front door.

"You're coming in?" asked his passenger.

"You can do this by yourself," Spears said. "Bring them to church tomorrow morning, and you can drive your car home."

The younger man shook his hand and climbed out of the Taurus. Spears waited until W. Carlton Ames, IV had rung the bell, the door opened, and he saw Susan's arms around his neck and No. 5 jumping up to hug him. Then he drove back to his apartment in the silent church.