

*A Descant for St. Simeon*

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From Advent until Easter, the Rector was wracked with cold. November gripped the Downtown Church of Our Savior, while the Reverend Charles Spears huddled beside the space heater in his study listening to the window glass shudder against the brittle caulk. Parishioners talked happily of condominiums in Naples and Caribbean cruises, but the sixty-seven year old priest fantasized about wrapping himself in a blanket to supplement the steam heat and uninsulated brick walls. He had nearly convinced himself that his chills were the symptom of a circulatory disorder, when Dorothy Ames opened the door without knocking and sat down in his frayed Chippendale guest chair.

“Louise isn’t getting any better,” the octogenarian widow of the city’s most ruthless industrialist said. “She’s never going to leave that place.”

“That place” was assisted living at the Episcopal Retirement Home, whose mauve walls enclosed the inmates in the tainted air of despair. Spears had thought Mrs. Ames wanted to talk about casting the Christmas pageant or her plans for a Caribbean cruise. She had chartered a yacht for her five dependent adult children and their spouses or significant others plus twenty-three grandchildren produced by her children or their present partners in earlier, impermanent relationships.

“I see her there every Thursday for Bible study,” the priest said, imagining the matriarch sweeping across a sun bleached teak deck in a flowing linen wrap, displaying an occasional enameled toe or gnarled shoulder to her coconut oiled descendants. “She’s getting the best possible care.”

“There isn’t anything they can do for her, Charles,” Mrs. Ames said bitterly.

The Rector was silent as he was silent whenever the Psalmist or Dorothy Ames railed against God. Her beautician insulated her against age with the subtly colored hair and make up of a woman forty years younger, and her couturier concealed her wasted figure under the wiring of a tailored silk suit, but her spotted hands trembled.

“She’ll miss the Christmas pageant,” Mrs. Ames continued. “She hasn’t missed a Christmas pageant in sixty-three years.”

Now it’s coming, Spears thought. Dorothy Ames had not manipulated her marauding husband and domineered her children into their forties without having a solution for every problem she created. Younger sister Louise, however, lacked Dorothy’s sense for the vulnerability of others. Instead of a rich marriage, she had spent her life convinced that the man she was destined to marry had been killed in the Korean War. To dramatize her loss, she would distribute trifles to her nieces and nephews on holidays, then look away at her own lost happiness. Only her sister appreciated the show.

Within a week of the Bush administration’s announcement of an agreement with North Korea to dismantle its nuclear arsenal in exchange for colossal bribes, a stroke released Dorothy from her morbid self-pity. Now her sister wanted to bring it all back with images of the grandchildren she would never have.

“But I’ve been thinking,” Mrs. Ames said. “After the pageant at the church, we could bring the grandchildren to the Retirement Home, and they could put it on again for Louise.” She paused, studying the Rector’s face for some sign of approval. “Of course the other residents could attend too, I suppose.”

“I’m sure the residents would love to see the Christmas pageant,” Spears said.

“Then you’ll have to give my grandchildren all the speaking parts, so there won’t be any confusion about who has which part at the Church and the Retirement Home.”

“I’m sure there won’t be any confusion at all about who is playing whom,” the Rector agreed.

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“I’ve been here longer than anyone else,” Alan Sims greeted the priest when he arrived for Bible study in the activities room, the one with the large screen TV.

Wearing trousers that had not been pressed in years, a call button around his neck, and white athletic shoes, Sims had forgotten that there was a time when he was not. Nevertheless, he was one of the Rector’s few scholars who could still talk, who could do anything besides slump against the rails of his wheelchair and snore or stare at the television after the priest had turned off the sound. Spears had tried turning the set off altogether, but the residents found that too disorienting. In this hopeless routine, even the priest had forgotten that neither intrigue nor angels spared the aged or the insane.

“I was here first,” Alan cried to each new arrival as the nurse’s aides deposited them around the table.

Eldred Morgan, once president of a major bank, was positioned next to Sims. He patted the arm of his wheelchair when an aide rolled in Louise. She wore a bright yellow sweater that her sister Dorothy had provided, and a Navaho blanket from the finest catalogue was draped across her knees.

“Here, Louise, sit beside me,” he said.

“When did you get here?” Alan Sims demanded.

Awakened by feelings he had not experienced in decades, the banker ignored Sims' question. Unlike most residents, Morgan had been enabled by his illness to shed all the strictures of his adult life. Without benefit of Viagra® or Cialis®, he lusted after Louise with a passion he had not felt since he had necked with her in the back seat of a 1940 Chevrolet before his wartime marriage to a stranger. Louise, however, could not remember anything except her terrible sense of loss.

“When did you get here?” Alan asked Clair Duncan, last to be wheeled into place. Clair wore an old sweater with so many knobs of wool streaming from it that the Rector feared it would catch on something and unravel completely. Widow of a long deceased clergyman, she was so lost in her visions of angels and celestial cities that she never bothered to answer.

As the nurse's aides retreated to the snack machines for an hour of near peace, Spears opened his Bible to begin the lesson.

“We're going to study Christmas story the next few weeks so we can be ready for the pageant.”

“A Christmas pageant?” Morgan exclaimed, titillated by a sudden memory of Louise singing “Oh, Holy Night” in their high school Christmas concert and actually hitting the high note. “I want to be in it.”

“I get to be Jesus,” Alan Sims said. “I was here first.”

“I'm afraid all the parts are taken,” Spears replied.

“That's not fair,” Morgan said. “I'm going back to my room”

As Morgan fumbled for his call button, Louise said, “Why don't you act your age?” in the lopsided voice of the stroke victim,

“That’s a great idea, Louise,” the Rector said. “There are parts for people your age in Luke’s Gospel.”

“Let me see,” Morgan said, dropping the call button and reaching for Spears’ Bible. “Who do I get to be?”

“I can see you as Zacharias.”

“What about me?” Sims cried. “I was here first.”

“You will make a perfect Simeon,” Sims said.

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Christmas Eve, the Ames children and grandchildren processed from the Church to the Retirement Home in the largest Hummers and BMWs on the market, plus a Mercedes Maibach® for the matriarch. Frenetic children streamed through the halls, startling nurses’ aides and wheel-chaired residents, while sulking teenagers leered at each other across the requisite degrees of consanguinity. Chauffeured by her oldest son, Dorothy Ames arrived in mink clad splendor a stylish fifteen minutes late to find the Rector huddled with the narrator, an eleven-year-old granddaughter. While shepherds chased Wise Men and angels around the activity room with their staves, Spears was showing the preteen the lines he had added at the beginning and the end of the Christmas story.

“Isn’t this a little much?” the matriarch said to the priest.

“Not if you want Louise to have a part.”

Two aids wheeled Louise and Eldred Morgan to the front of the room, each clutching a paper with their lines.

“Louise?” Dorothy said, but her sister, focused on her lost happiness, did not reply.

“I think we’re ready,” Spears called, and Ames daughters and daughters in law herded the cast through a circle of wheel chairs and sat them on the floor at the front of the room.

The Rector turned off the television to signal the beginning of the pageant. When the narrator picked up the microphone, it groaned and shrilled, imposing a metallic silence on the audience. The Rector took his assigned seat beside the matriarch.

“In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest name Zechariah, of the division of Abijah, and he had a wife of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.”

Eldred Morgan, resplendent in a red bathrobe and Christmas tie, wheeled himself forward and leered at the audience. Louise Hollingsworth clutched her large print script and stared at the floor, as if she feared her Navaho blanket would slip off.

“Where did that come from?” Dorothy Ames demanded.

“The beginning of the Gospel,” Spears said. “It is frequently omitted.”

“But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years,” the narrator continued the story of John the Baptist’s improbable conception.

A diminutive angel approached Morgan and announced:

“Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.”

“I wish!” Eldred Morgan cried as Zechariah had cried, greeting the announcement with ridicule and disbelief.

The room exploded with laughter.

“Elder sex,” a teenage voice exclaimed.

“Aunt Louise is pregnant!” another piped.

Furious, Dorothy Ames arose and stared down her roiling descendents.

“That’s enough!” she said in the voice that had terrified two generations into submission.

Even Eldred Morgan was hushed. In the sudden silence, the angel began reading his new lines.

“I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God; and I was sent to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things come to pass, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.”

To avoid Dorothy Ames’ stare, the muted Morgan wheeled himself to the side, leaving the stage clear for the angel to announce another unexpected pregnancy, this time to a five-year-old Mary. Louise watched in shocked silence. The narrator told how Mary went into the hill country to the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth; how Elizabeth’s baby leapt in her womb when Mary entered; and how Elizabeth then exclaimed with a loud cry. Silence.

Spears tried to catch the narrator’s eye to signal her to read Elizabeth’s most famous lines, when Louise’s blanket slid to the floor. She was wearing a long red skirt, the same skirt she had worn at countless Christmas Eve dinners in her sister’s mansion as the children grew up and the grandchildren appeared, while her life slipped away in frustration and regret.

“Louise,” her sister whispered. “Are you all right?”

The tiny Mary stepped between Louise’s line of sight and the floor, turning her face to look up at the old woman. For the first time in decades, Louise looked into a sympathetic human face.

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb,” Louise said out of some ancient memory.

Spears had never seen Dorothy Ames weep; even at her husband’s funeral, she had maintained a Roman composure. Now she sobbed so deeply that even her son asked if she were all right. She couldn’t answer, but Mary was beginning the Magnificat, and all the room heard it as if for the first time.

Then a nurse’s aid retrieved Eldred Morgan from the corner, and the scene shifted to the circumcision of the infant John the Baptist in the Temple.

“I need a baby,” Louise said.

Everyone froze; this was not a cast that could handle improvisation well. Spears wondered how he could have forgotten that they needed two babies for the nativities of John the Baptist and Jesus. Then Mary, waiting for her next big scene, grabbed the doll that would soon be Jesus and handed it to her great aunt. Louise stared at it as if she were looking into the face of God.

Another Ames grandchild in a bathrobe, playing the priest, asked Elizabeth the baby’s name.

“He shall be called John,” she said.

Surprised, the priest asked Zechariah to confirm his son's name. Morgan held up a shirt board that said: "His name is John." His speech miraculously restored, he recited the song of Zecharia from 18-point type.

Then the narrator began the familiar lines about Caesar Augustus' census, and the matriarch relaxed. Mary and Joseph pantomimed the journey to Nazareth and their rejection at the inn, before Mary remembered that she had given her baby to her great aunt. She tiptoed to the old woman.

"Here," Louise said. "You can have him now."

Then the angels appeared, startling the shepherds, and the pageant reached its traditional climax. Instead of ending with the Wise Men, however, aids wheeled Alan Sims and Clair Duncan to the front. Mary picked up the doll, and followed by Joseph, entered the Temple for her son's circumcision.

"Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him," the narrator continued.

"I was here first," said Alan Sims.

"And it was revealed to him by the holy spirit, that he should not see death before he saw the Lord's anointed," the narrator concluded, leaving the virgin mother, her silent husband and her child before the ancient who had wandered into the Temple at the critical moment. Even Clair Duncan, positioned beside Sims as Anna, the old woman who had worshipped every night with fasting and prayer waiting for this event stirred, as if something great was about to happen.

Louise reached over and touched the paper in Sims' hands. He held it up and read:

“Lord, now lettest thou thy servant  
depart in peace,  
according to thy word . . .

Sims paused, and everyone in the audience held their breath. Instead of praying to see the end of the story, the old man was asking to die. Prodded by some long ago memory, Louise and Eldred Morgan continued Simeon's song like singers of an ancient madrigal.

“For mine eyes have seen thy  
salvation  
which thou hast prepared before the face of all people,  
A light to lighten the Gentiles,  
and for glory to thy people Israel.”

Everyone waited as an audience waits after the final movement of an unfamiliar piece, not knowing whether to applaud. Then a new voice began the song all over again in the high, almost silent soprano of the angels. Clair Duncan was chanting the most perfect prayer for death ever uttered. When she finished her descant, Dorothy Ames rushed forward to embrace her sister, and the children and grandchildren clapped.

Spears congratulated the octogenarian cast while the audience reached for Christmas cookies and a ginger ale based punch. Dorothy was standing beside Louise, holding her hand.

“Charles, I've changed my mind. I'm not going.”

“Not going,” he repeated.

“The children and grandchildren can take the cruise without me. I'm staying with Dorothy.”

“Isn’t that a wonderful present, Charles?” Louise asked.

“Yes,” the Rector agreed, not knowing yet that the best of all Christmas presents, the one most earnestly prayed for by the residents of the Episcopal Retirement Home, was about to arrive. Clair Duncan died on New Years Day, and Louise on Epiphany. Charles Spears never knew who would be in the activity room when he arrived for Thursday Bible study, nor did he mourn their happy absences.