

ANGELS
WITHOUT
WINGS

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ANGELS WITHOUT WINGS

"A Jew on Christmas is like an angel without wings," my Uncle Paul used to say.

Not that Uncle Paul disliked any particular Jews, of whom in any case there were few in the little upstate town of Windsor, New York, where he and my mother grew up and where he and Aunt Flo still lived in the ancestral home – a narrow, two-story frame house set back from Pine Street. His next-door neighbors on the right were Jews, as was his boss at the bank, and Uncle Paul got along fine with them.

It was mostly the *idea* of Jews that got Uncle Paul riled. He seemed to take their rejection of Christ personally. After all, it was they who prophesied Christ, as in Isaiah 9:6: *For unto us a child is born . . . and his name shall be called . . . the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.*

What could be clearer than that? These were Jewish words, written centuries before the birth of Christ, words that the Jews themselves still considered holy. If anyone should believe, Uncle Paul thought, it should be Jews. Christ Himself was a Jew, as well as Mary, Joseph, and all of the Apostles.

But instead they killed Him. It might be politically incorrect to say so, but there was no arguing against a fact. Pontius Pilate washed his hands of it, and the Roman soldiers carried it out, but the Jews

demanded it, and then reaffirmed it by choosing to set free Barabbas instead of Christ.

And they would do it again, Uncle Paul was certain, if Christ came back at a time when they had the power to do it. The religious ones, the ones in the black hats and coats. In any state they ran, you could bet that Christians would be persecuted, as they were of old, and worship of Christ would be forbidden as blasphemy. Even in Israel, a supposedly secular Jewish state, Jewish stars were everywhere, even on the flag, and Jewish prayers were said on every public occasion.

But turn things around, and here in Windsor the third grade couldn't even put on a Christmas play because it might offend the one Jewish child in the class. The town hall had to get rid of the nativity scene on the front lawn. (Just think about what kind of fuss objecting to the public display of a menorah in Israel would engender!) The Bible could no longer be read at public assemblies. The football team could no longer pray to Christ in the locker room before games, even though there had never been a single Jew on the team in anyone's memory. And so on and on through a much-repeated litany of grievances against the Jews.

The thing was that in a Christian country the Jews insisted that all public symbols and practices of religion be forbidden, while in Israel, Christians and Muslims were forced to tolerate a Jewish state.

They were smart, Uncle Paul conceded. In every country they infected they became rich, became lawyers, took over the media, so they could have their

way. A tiny minority ruled the vast majority, preventing them from living a Christian life.

No one understood why Uncle Paul was so obsessed with Jews. In all other respects he was mild mannered and reserved, a large, silver-haired man with pale skin and lips and light blue eyes, who looked like he might have gone through too many washings. He was the formal type who always wore a jacket and tie outside the house, and even inside kept on the white shirt, the dress pants, the freshly shined shoes.

But on the subject of Jews it was as though he had a little lava lake of fury that, like an intermittently active volcano, erupted and subsided on its own schedule.

Then suddenly one Christmas Eve the tirades stopped.

My parents and I would spend every Christmas with Uncle Paul and Aunt Flo. For my mother it was "going home" for the holidays. For me the little house on Pine Street in Windsor, New York, *was* Christmas, and as the only child in the house – my parents had only one, and Uncle Paul and Aunt Flo were childless – I was for many years the lens through which Christmas happened.

There was no chimney in the small Bronx apartment where I grew up, and I often wondered how Santa would have gotten in to deliver presents had we not gone up to celebrate Christmas in Windsor. There, there was an ample fireplace and room for a tall, beautifully decorated tree, and piles of presents on Christmas morning, which after breakfast I unwrapped

to the shrieks of delight of four perhaps overly indulgent adults.

At any rate, one Christmas Eve, when I was twelve, Uncle Paul called home from the bank to say he would be late. It had been snowing heavily all day. A colleague had damaged his car in one of the many accidents that morning, and Uncle Paul was going to drive him home. He lived just a bit past the next town, Damascus, and so it shouldn't take long.

Five hours later, the police called. They had found Uncle Paul unconscious in his car, which had skidded off the treacherous country road on the way back to Damascus. He seemed to be unhurt, but they had sent him by ambulance to the emergency room in Binghamton, just to be sure.

When we finally got both him and his Jeep home at around midnight, Uncle Paul seemed physically fine but distracted, as though something had happened on that little snowy road to Damascus that now occupied his attention completely. He answered our questions in single syllables, said he was tired, that he couldn't talk now, couldn't sit down with us to dinner.

We put him to bed, and the next morning he seemed perfectly normal – with one significant change: He said nothing more about Jews. Nothing good, nothing bad. It was as though a faucet had been turned off inside him, and the torrent of anger and hatred had ceased to flow.

The faucet remained off for the rest of his life, some twenty years, at the end of which he died at his

desk at the bank of a stroke. Aunt Flo lasted another ten lonely years before she followed him. Since my parents had also died, and I was the last of the family, on the Christmas Eve after Aunt Flo's death I found myself again in Windsor to pack up whatever needed to be saved and to get rid of the rest before selling the house.

In the interim I had gotten married, had had two children, had gotten divorced, and now lived alone near Boston, where I had tenure at a small Catholic college.

So it was with a good deal of nostalgic melancholy that I went through the bits and pieces of my family's lives – photographs and letters, certificates, printed announcements and invitations, holiday cards and condolence cards and thank-you cards – that are the standard detritus of ordinary living.

At around 1:00 AM a single piece of paper written on both sides in my uncle's handwriting fluttered to the floor. It had been tucked into a notebook that recorded meticulously the transactions of the local Knights of Columbus chapter, of which Uncle Paul had been perennial treasurer.

I opened the paper, which had been folded in half the better to fit in the notebook, and saw the title in large letters: *A Vision*, underneath which was a date: *Christmas Eve, 1977*.

And then:

I had dropped Henry Slater off at his house and had just started back towards Damascus when I felt my car unaccountably drifting off the road in heavy snow. I came to

a stop in an open field, which was, however, green under a warm, starry sky.

Bewildered, I got out of the car to see Christ descending towards me out of the stars.

He was, as on most crucifixes, nearly naked, and bleeding from the wounds of the cross. In His bloody hands, each perforated by a large hole the diameter of a half dollar, he carried a white dove which had no wings.

"Oh, Paul, Paul!" Christ called out to me in sorrow. "Why do you persecute me?"

"Dear Lord!" I cried back. "How do I persecute you? What do I do to offend you?"

Christ held up the wingless dove, white but for smears of blood from His hands.

"You have taken my wings," He said.

"How have I taken Your wings?" I cried out again in dismay. I was shaking with remorse and confusion.

He came closer to me and took me in His arms with His bloody hands and held me against His bloody chest. And He whispered to me, "I am a Jew, am I not?"

Then He kissed me on both cheeks and hugged me again to His bloody, bony body, and in that hug I felt all the love of the universe spill into me, as though a sea had emptied itself into my heart.

"Forgive me!" I said. "Forgive me!" Again and again, weeping, weeping, until I was awakened by the police and found myself behind the wheel of my Jeep in the middle of a white snowy field.

The hatred in me was gone. I pray that it never returns.

Your prayer was answered, I whispered to Uncle Paul, the one who had written these words nearly thirty years ago, who could not have known when he wrote them that he would never again express hatred for Jews.

What he felt inside, of course, is unknown. How many of us, however deep our love of Christ and faith in Christ's love for us, can ever totally banish hatred from our hearts? I knew all too well that I couldn't – hadn't – hadn't even tried in one particular case, which was one reason I was sitting alone on Christmas Eve in the living room where as a child I had known so much Christmas love and beauty.

But I hoped that Uncle Paul had found some peace in the twenty years that had been left to him, and prayed for us all to find peace from the hatred in our hearts, for all of us angels without wings on this Christmas Eve, as on every Christmas Eve, singing of Christ's glory yet still unable to fly.