

Jimmy opened his housekeeping closet and withdrew the longest of his step-ladders. He'd need it to reach the Madonna, and tonight, She had to shine. It was Christmas Eve, and the altar guild had finished with their preparations. Fresh greenery adorned every available crevice of the old, gothic church, filling the air with smells as sacred to Jimmy's memory as any incense. Poinsettias brought more color than all the vestments and hangings ever would.

He'd grown up caring for the Church of the Redeemer. His father had been the sexton before him. And tonight was the most special of all nights for him. This was the night when the church would fill with the voices of singing like it did on no other moment in the year. He thought back to countless Christmas Eves, cradled on a back pew of the church in his mother's arms, listening and watching in awe as the spectacle of Midnight Mass unfolded.

Tonight he would watch again as people who almost never attended church any other time of the year came to celebrate the birth of the Christ Child, but before they arrived, he had a special task.

During the course of the year, Jimmy had always taken the time to dust the Madonna in her niche very carefully. But because she was so high on the wall he usually settled for what he could do with his extension handle from the floor. It was too high, too dangerous and time consuming to get the ladder out every week.

But not for Christmas. For Christmas, as his father had done, he would haul out the step ladder, and standing on the very top step (in spite of the clear warning printed right there that this was very dangerous) he would lovingly clean the statue of Mother and Child with warm water and the gentlest soap he could find. Jesus and his Mother had to be perfect for Christmas Eve.

And so Jimmy carried the ladder to its spot just beneath Mary's niche and went off to his closet to fill a bucket with warm water and Woolite. He'd decided a few years ago that this was probably the easiest kind of soap to use because it rinsed so well, and was so gentle on clothes that it probably wouldn't hurt Mary or the Baby.

When he'd finished at the sink, he carried the bucket to the foot of the ladder and soaked a sponge, wringing it out well before ascending the ladder. Years of doing this had taught him that it was just too dangerous to try to carry the bucket up to the top with him, it upset his balance too much, so instead he would climb and descend to the bucket over and over again until he was finished. This was a large part of the reason this only happened once a year.

Jimmy didn't climb all the way to the top this first time, as he began with Mary's feet and worked his way to her crownlike halo each year. No part of the statue would be overlooked. Taking care not to squeeze the sponge hard enough to make water run down the wall, he gently scrubbed away at the year's accumulated grime, city grime that

the duster just couldn't remove. He wouldn't risk damaging the statue, so it was with infinite patience and the gentlest of touches that he removed the dark gray soot.

When he'd soiled the sponge, Jimmy climbed down and rinsed it, and went back to continue his work. Over and over again he went up and down the ladder, first finishing the Madonna's feet, then beginning with her beautiful blue robe, gradually working his way to her arms, where nestled the beautiful baby, who looked adoringly into the face of His mother.

Here Jimmy refilled the bucket with fresh water, to be sure that the Christ Child was spotless when he was done. Wrapped in white, cradled in Mary's elbow, he was perfect. Jimmy looked upon the infant with the same adoration that the tiny One held for his mother. No one but Jimmy could understand how important it was for the baby Jesus to be perfect on this night. Every subtle skin tone, every glint in the Baby's blue eyes, every ray of his halo had to shine like the sun tonight, for this was God's Son.

At last he finished with the Baby, and went on to finish cleaning the rest of the Madonna. In order to reach her shoulders and head, Jimmy had to stand at the very top of the ladder, balancing precariously (he refused to touch, let alone hold on to the statue for help) and working carefully and gently until the gold gilt of Mary's halo shone brilliantly with Her son's.

On creaking knees, Jimmy climbed down the ladder for the last time and gathered his cleaning supplies. He pulled the ladder away and admired his work, smiling broadly in the empty church as he saw the way the Madonna and Her Child glowed in the old stone niche. Yes, tonight, they were perfect, just as they needed to be. And then an old sadness returned. The sadness that came whenever he thought about how he wished his Jesus really understood how hard his life was. He looked up at that perfect infant, in the arms of his spotless Mother, and he knew that, as much as Jesus loved him, He didn't have a clue about what real, hard life was like. He was sad because, like the statue, Jesus seemed too high up, too far away to see what it was really like to try to get by.

He put away the ladder and rinsed out the bucket, and went to his tiny room in the undercroft. For years he'd kept this small place for times like this, when he was too tired to get home and back again in time for Mass. He plopped down in a ratty, overstuffed chair, propped his feet on the old mattresses opposite him, tuned to some Christmas music on the radio, and fell sound asleep in minutes. Jimmy knew he'd wake in plenty of time to dress and attend the late Mass, so he slept soundly.

At about 9:30, Jimmy awoke, groggy from having slept much longer than he'd expected. There was still plenty of time before Mass, but he felt "stupid-in-the-head" from sleep, and it took him almost an hour to begin to feel like himself. In the meantime he shaved with an electric shaver he kept at the church and put on the fresh suit of clothes he'd brought from the cleaners that morning. He too had to be perfect for Christmas Eve! He turned up the radio, which would later be broadcasting the service from Redeemer

live, and listened to more carols as he dressed.

Once he was ready Jimmy went out to the corner bodega for a bagel and a cup of coffee. He'd be at church late, cleaning up and locking up after Mass, so he figured he'd better eat something. Walking back he saw the first people arriving for the service. Because seating was at a premium for this Mass, many folks showed up nearly an hour before the first note sounded in order to get decent places from which to watch. Jimmy took the same seat in the last pew that he'd occupied for 50 odd years with his parents, and now on his own, and waited and watched as congregants filed in, decked in their Christmas finery, and filled the huge dark space with color and excited voices.

Acolytes came out and lit the candles that lined the center aisle about fifteen minutes before the service, and the volume of the hub-bub reduced noticeably. The church was pretty full by this time, and people were taking "standing-room" places in the aisles up and down the sides of the sanctuary. Jimmy watched and smiled as the ushers put up folding chairs in as many places as they could without invoking the wrath of the local Fire Chief. The hush settled more and more heavily over the congregation as the choir of men and boys emerged from the undercroft in the rear and lined up for the procession. Jimmy fixed his eyes on the Madonna and offered his thanksgivings for this perfect night. The organ introduced the first hymn with a trumpet flourish, and the choir processed into the stalls in front to begin the festival of carols that would precede the Mass.

No sooner had the last chorister passed Jimmy's pew, though, than one of the ushers dressed in a fine black suit and wearing a beautiful, ankle length black cashmere overcoat tapped him urgently on the shoulder. "Jimmy. Jimmy! I need you for something, now!" Jimmy turned, perturbed at being interrupted. "I'm not working now. Pastor has always said I could just worship during services. No work. You guys deal with it."

The usher paused, confused. He was silent until he could respond quietly. "But Jimmy, this is an *emergency*. I really need you."

For a moment, Jimmy wondered what the emergency might be. They'd had a couple of steam pipes replaced recently. He hoped there wasn't a problem with them. No. The ushers would never notice those, they were in a distant part of the undercroft. These guys never got much beyond the vestibule. "What's the darned emergency?"

The fellow hesitated for a moment, then said, "Um, I think you'd better come see for yourself."

Reluctantly, Jimmy stood and allowed the usher to lead him out the rear doors of the sanctuary into the large vestibule. The "emergency" quickly made itself apparent.

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" cried an anguished woman's voice from a corner to Jimmy's

right. Before the usher could point the way, Jimmy was running toward her as she sat in a heap on the floor. A smallish man was standing over her, wringing his hands. Their shoes were covered by snow that had not yet melted. The part that had was already making a puddle on Jimmy's clean floor. By the time he got within ten feet of them, he knew what the "emergency" was. This woman was about to have a baby. He spun on the usher, who had vanished, probably back to the sanctuary. Looking back, the man standing with the woman asked, "Can you help?"

Disgusted that he was being left to manage this and miss his favorite service of the entire year, Jimmy took several moments to compose himself before answering. "Yeah. Hang on. There's a phone downstairs. I'll call an ambulance. You gotta get her to a hospital." He turned toward the descending spiral stairs, but before he could take a step he felt the man's hand on his arm.

"Please, please no! No hospital, please! They'll deport us!"

"Oh, great," thought Jimmy. "Illegals." "But buddy, if she doesn't get to a hospital, she's gonna have that baby right on the floor. We don't have much choice."

"Please, please," begged the man, who stood perhaps 5'6", can't you just find us a warm place to stay for a little. Please? We have no heat where we're staying. Please?"

The woman, who was obviously having contractions, cried out again. "Oh, man!" hollered Jimmy. "Can she walk?"

"I don't think so," said the man. "We been walking around the city for a long time. I think she's too tired. We been trying places all over. Nobody would let us stay."

Jimmy scooped her up in his arms and started again for the spiral staircase. "Follow me, then," he said over his shoulder.

He carried the woman to his cubicle in the undercroft and laid her gently on the two mattresses stacked there. "I'll be back. Gotta get something clean for her to lay on." He stormed off into the maze that was the undercroft in search of something decent on which to deliver a baby. A baby! Geez. Why now? Why him?

There were no sheets, of course, anywhere in the church. He finally settled on some old choir robes that had been cleaned and stored in an old closet years ago. Hadn't been touched since. They even had the plastic from the cleaners on them. At least the smelled okay when he opened the covers. Hurrying back, he found the man hovering over the woman, comforting her in Spanish. Or at least he thought it was Spanish.

"You guys married?" he asked as he laid out three of the robes and helped the woman roll herself onto the cleaner surface.

“Yes,” came the one word answer. Well, that at least was something. He wondered why they had no wedding rings, though.

“And where ya from?”

When the husband answered “Mexico,” Jimmy scowled.

“It’s not what you think! We didn’t come here just to have the baby, to get citizenship and all that. We did it to save the baby!” If Jimmy expression had been audible, it would have said, “Yeah, right.”

“No, really man. Maria would’ve died if we stayed. Some big new company opened a factory in our village two years ago. They dump all kinds of chemicals in our stream, poison the water! Would’ve killed Maria, the baby too. We had to get out!” Jimmy listened a bit more carefully. He’d heard about companies going South to avoid environmental laws. “So we came up here. My brother is a super in a building on the upper East side. He doesn’t have papers either, but they pay him pretty good. He got me a job like that in another building. But we can’t stay in the building. We’re up in a little place in the Bronx where the landlord won’t keep the heat on. Been freezing for a week. Then this!” He bent over and kissed his wife’s forehead.

“Well, we’ll get you through this, I guess...” But just as he said this, the woman screamed again. “I think. Geez... You ever done this before?” The man shook his head. “Well, neither have I, so it looks like we fake it. You get this bucket clean as you can, and fill it with hot water. I’m not sure what it’s for, but they always get hot water for this. I’m gonna get some more robes to use for towels. “You gonna be okay for a couple more minutes?” The woman nodded mutely. “Okay, I’ll be back in just a second. The sink’s right down that way. Oh, I’m Jimmy.” He held out his huge hand.

“I’m Hector. This is Maria.” Jimmy nodded and ran off to collect more of the unused choir robes. He hoped he wouldn’t get in too much trouble.

When he came back, he folded the robes on a corner of the bed and watched as the woman panted between contractions. He turned on the radio to listen to the service upstairs, angry that he was missing it. Then he bent to Maria and asked her if she were okay. “Just thirsty,” was all she said. Jimmy grabbed an unopened Pepsi from a small shelf near the bed and offered it to her. “Maybe this’ll help.” Maria smiled up at him as she sipped the soda.

Hector eased his way into the room, the bucket full of steaming water, and Jimmy stepped away, allowing him to sit beside his wife and comfort her as she rested.

“In the bleak mid-winter, frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone.
Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow.

In the bleak midwinter, long ago.”

The choir crooned a favorite Christmas carol as Jimmy listened. He could almost see them all, facing each other up in the stalls as they intoned the hymn in perfect harmony. From years of experience, he knew that this was the last of the carols before the Mass. Soon the Pastor would begin the service proper. Dadgummit. He looked at the poor couple in front of him, it was surely a bleak winter for them.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhh!” screamed Maria as another contraction set in. Hector draped a robe over her knees and lifted them to look. “Oh,man, the baby! I can see the head a little!”

Jimmy stood, pretty much frozen. He didn’t have a clue about what to do next.

“Aaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

“The baby!” hollered Hector, reaching to help.

“Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let every heart,
prepare Him room,
and heaven and nature sing!”

Jimmy didn’t need the radio to hear the organ, choir and congregation as they launched into the first hymn of the Mass. He stood close to Hector, to offer a hand, if it were needed. “The head is out!” cried the terrified father.

“Push, Maria! Push!” urged Jimmy. He was pretty sure that’s what they said at times like this on ER. “That’s it, girl! Push!”

Maria’s face reddened as she held her breath and bent forward, pushing as hard as she could.

“That’s it! That’s it!” cried Hector. “Just a little more, baby.. Just a little more. I have him. I have him! It’s a boy!”

Maria screamed one more time as she bore down for one last push. “Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!” she groaned with her enormous effort.

“Yes, yes baby! Yes!” Hector laughed and cried as he held the baby, still attached to its umbilical cord. “Can I have one of those?” he nodded to the pile of robes.

“Yeah, right!” Jimmy grabbed one and unfolded it so they could wrap the naked infant up. He’d never seen anything quite as ugly. The baby’s head was slightly deformed from the birth canal, and it was covered with blood and some white stuff. “But shouldn’t we

cut that?" he said, pointing to the cord.

"I guess," said Hector. Maria nodded her agreement. "Hang on..." said Jimmy, who ran up to the parish office and borrowed some of those big clamp-type paper clips and scissors. He ran back and found the three pretty much as he'd left them. Hector had cleaned up the baby a little, who was crying loudly. The umbilicus connected the baby to the placenta which Maria had expelled. Clamping it in two places, Jimmy said, "I hope this doesn't hurt," and snipped in between the clamps. Maria and Hector had screwed up their faces, expecting a scream from the baby, but there was no reaction other than more of the same angry crying.

"I guess he liked it better inside..." chuckled Jimmy.

"The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes,
but little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes...."

They were singing the hymn at the Gospel procession.

Jimmy watched mother and father and son as they cuddled together in the basement of the church. He watched as Maria gently dipped a corner of the one of the robes in the hot water, blew on it to cool it a little, and then wiped clean her baby's face. In the gentleness of her touch he could feel his own as he'd washed the statue of the infant upstairs. In the intense love in Maria's face, he thought he could see a hint of the halo of the Madonna. From the radio, he heard:

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has

taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Jimmy listened to the words of the Christmas gospel, and he heard them for perhaps the first time. This was what it had been like. No room, a cold night. He, Jimmy had played the role of the reluctant innkeeper. He hoped, but doubted that Joseph and Mary had been treated any better.

No decent place to lay the baby.
And as for all that stuff about not crying?
That was just laughable!

Jimmy looked into the tiny brown face of the infant lying there in his cubicle in the undercroft, and he cried. Here, in this dirty little face he'd discovered a Jesus he'd never known. Here he found Christ who didn't reign from a niche high above the reach of most ladders, but one who truly visited His people.

Here was the Christ who invited him to sit in the first pew, not the last.

Here was the One through whom all things had been made, and in whom all things, not just the beautiful ones, had been redeemed.

When Maria had fallen asleep, Jimmy left Hector to watch her. He went upstairs to hear the remainder of the service, and to receive Communion. As he walked up the center aisle toward the altar, he kept his eyes fixed on the statue he'd spent so much time cleaning that afternoon. It looked no less beautiful, but Jimmy thought he could see a smudge of the grime from the stable on the face of the baby. He thought he could see the signs of sweat and exhaustion on the face of the Mother.

And the love with which they regarded each other seemed almost palpable, so palpable in fact that Jimmy ran right into the back of the person in line before him.

"Oh.. I'm sorry!" he said, reflexively.

"No problem, man!" said the usher who'd first summoned Jimmy from the church.
"Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas indeed! Hey.. You know that couple you called me for....?" The other man silenced Jimmy with a wink and a finger to his lips.

“I know. Catch you later...” And he turned back around in line. Jimmy grinned, looking forward to sharing his story once the service ended. He gazed lovingly at the Madonna and Child until he’d reached the head of the line. He went to kneel at the rail, but the usher who’d been in front of him was nowhere to be seen.

After Communion, Jimmy hurried downstairs to check on Hector, Maria, and the baby. They too were gone. In fact, there were few traces that they’d ever been there. Jimmy ran up the stairs to see which way they’d gone, but none of the ushers remembered seeing them leave. Nor did any of them remember an usher in a beautiful, long, black cashmere coat.

From that day forward, Jimmy cleaned the statue of the Madonna at Christmas Eve, just like he’d always done. Well, almost. Each year, he’d leave one dark smudge on the face of each of the characters, as a thank you to the Christ he’d come to know in the undercroft.