

Finding Christmas

Stories of Startling Joy
and Perfect Peace

James Calvin Schaap



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You've Been Searching for Joy . . .

Who hasn't? It's Christmas. So where's the goodwill? Where's the love? Would you recognize them if you saw them? Maybe you ought to **Prepare for the Unexpected** (page 7). Or unravel Christmas joy as in **The Mystery** (page 11). Someone says you can get a glimpse in the face of **The Baby** (page 19) at the local nativity. But you're not sure you'll make it. There's **The Party** (page 31). And there are presents to buy. Finding just the right ones takes time, sometimes a lifetime, says that mom who knows all about **The Gifts** (page 57). Maybe if you look at **The Church** (page 85). Surely there's joy there. Remember that time you saw it in the faces of the children at **The Pageant** (page 99). How wonderful that is, like **The Afterglow** (page 113) when all those you love and enjoy most have been round you. What if you could find that joy all over again? What if joy like that would descend, covering you and everyone you know like **The Snowfall** (page 141)—what then? What then? **Wouldn't it change everything?**

Prepare for the Unexpected

A Foreword

Most of the stories in this book end at beginnings. The last story ends with the last prayer of the Bible, one of the best beginnings an ending ever had: “Come, Lord Jesus.”

What better beginning than the coming of the Christ? Into our lives, into the world, his second coming ever fulfilling his first?

The character who prays that final prayer has just begun to know a personal, spiritual poverty which knowledge is the perfect preparation for Jesus.

Another character, a young girl standing outside the church at the end of her story, for the first time recognizes the baby Jesus in her arms, recognizes the Christ in the greater story of Christmas.

Another character, a grown woman, by watching the moment a new mother first meets her adopted baby, is persuaded to remember her own motherhood, and so begins grandmotherhood in hope and love.

And a grandmother's story ends just as her granddaughter says, for the first time ever, to the swelling of the old woman's heart: "I want to see Jesus."

There is a pattern here.

Jim Schaap writes about those common relationships that all of us have experienced. He knows our lives, re-fires our memories. He draws us into settings familiar. He causes us to inhabit the worlds of plain folk struggling with the problems of an ordinary life—and he makes it all so very, very important, for this is the place where humanity happens. We love and fail and work and hurt and grow here. And as all these stories revolve around Christmas and the incarnation, here too is where God comes to meet us, at which we make our best beginnings.

That is part of the pattern too. More than making them merely "important," Schaap writes sa-

cred mystery into our common lives. Every one of his stories brings us, his willing readers, to a holy *anagnorisis*.

This Greek word generally means “recognition.” Aristotle used it to describe that moment in a tragedy when some startling discovery by a character produces a change from ignorance to knowledge—and knowledge reverses the character’s life thereafter. In tragedy, that reversal is for the worst. Near the end of his play, Oedipus the king discovers to his horror that the woman he married is in fact the woman who bore him long ago. He has married his mother.

In Schaap’s stories the *anagnorisis*, the “recognition,” is ever and altogether the opposite. Lives leap toward their beginnings. Characters caught in struggles that bid fair to bury them (our grandmother, just minutes before her granddaughter wanted to “see Jesus,” had wished “that she were with Jack [her deceased husband] and the Lord”); characters in various forms of troubled ignorance; characters grown helpless all suddenly discover, by means most ordinary and familiar, that “Jesus . . . he’s always there.”

Perhaps a better word than *anagnorisis* is *epiphany*. James Joyce used it to describe certain recognitions in his stories; but his epiphanies often disabused a

character of some illusion. They showed reality to be a hard, impenetrable, unforthcoming thing.

Jim Schaap, however, uses this word in his very last story as it has been used by the Christian Church from its beginning: to describe the startling discovery that Christ can shine in the common things. The Lord of glory flashes forth! And reality grows sacred, the handiwork of God, the stuff that contained the Word, the Son of God.

I'll quote Schaap: "And that's when it hit me, this epiphany of Christmas. He came for those who need him, not because they are poor or slovenly or unable to care for themselves. He came for . . . some like me, self-satisfied with . . . arrogance. He came for me because I too—in my annoyance and my pride—am very much among the needy."

And then: "The Lord of heaven and earth was acting upon me. Come, Lord Jesus."

So ends the book, with the beginnings of a startling, everlasting joy.

Walter Wangerin Jr.
March 2005

The Mystery

A Preface

It's so cold outside that the bus windows are sealed in frost, and I don't see this monstrosity of a bus driver until the very second the doors swish open and she yelps at me to watch my step on the way up.

"My daughter's laid up right now in pain something fierce with a strained ligament," she says, "and I wouldn't bless something like that on my worst enemy."

She's so huge that her bulk hangs from the edge of the driver's seat the way a blanket of melting snow leans over a roof on a sunny day. Her legs have been poured into a pair of fancy black Levis; the seams have

been nailed shut, fortunately, by a line of brass rivets that run up from her boots to her waist. Her shirt is embroidered with squiggles and sequins down her forearms, her cuffs have mother-of-pearl snaps, and she's left her wide collar slanting open halfway to her navel, as if someone should care.

The bus is nearly full. I take a seat up front, one of the only ones left. I've been in her presence for all of ten seconds, but I've no trouble knowing why that's the only seat left: everyone else has taken cover.

"She was only stepping off a curb is all," the driver says, "and something went ping in her leg. Just like that, she went down."

I'm thinking that this is a university shuttle bus I've just boarded, and one is not supposed to find these types on university buses, where meditative silence reigns. Her jabber is an affront, an embarrassment, especially since it's aimed right at me. Her voice ricochets into the far reaches of the vehicle, and I pull out the latest campus paper, open it wide to cover my eyes.

"Course, I know about those things too," she says. "I lived through a torn ligament myself once—bring you a mess of pain, all right. People say a good sprain

is sometimes worse than a break. You know what I'm saying?"

Like it or not, she's zeroed in on me, jawing away as if I'd been her neighbor since the war—any of them. She's pushing sixty, I'm guessing—if you can read between the thick lines of eye shadow and the heavy splash of rouge that turns her puffy face into a Halloween mask. Her hair is nothing more or less than flat orange, and she's wearing this broad-brimmed cowboy hat with a flush of feathers jutting out from the right side of her head like the wing of a dead chicken.

"That was a whole lot of pain, that was. Kept me off my feet for far too long, I'll tell you."

I get the feeling that I'm going to be told, whether or not it's in my own best interest.

"That was back in my younger days. I didn't always keep such good records back then, and here if one night two guys don't show up for me at the same time." Her shoulders heave when she laughs and remembers. She stamps on the gas, and we lurch out from the curb. "So anyway, I'm upstairs with Alvin, see, and here if I don't hear the front doorbell. So I lean out the window, and what'll you know if it's not another guy downstairs come for me." She looks at

me in the mirror and raises one fat finger up to her lips as if mum's still the word on all this.

"I'm somewhere between a rock and a hard place," she says with a few more spicy words between. "So I got to try to make ends meet somehow, see? So I climb out on the roof to get away from Alvin. I sure didn't want him to know who was down there and why, but I got to get to the door for Bernie. Well, so as to make a long story short, I came up lame—turned an ankle when I come shimmying down the gutter."

I'm thinking of my children's talking clown. You give the cord a long jerk, and the doll jabbars until the cord gets gobbled up into its back. This one's got no cord that I can see.

"The odd thing is I end up that night with Bernie, the guy downstairs, if you can believe it. Of course, Alvin is my ex-husband." She says it proudly, face up, as if she's trying to catch some midsummer sunshine through the windshield of the bus.

It dawns on me then that I've stumbled on Chaucer's Wife of Bath.

She reaches back and flips her hair out of the back of her collar. "Can't help but feel sorry for my daughter this time, though—what with the tough time she's had, just leaving her husband like she did."

It makes no difference whether we're stopped at a light or cruising along through rush-hour traffic, the monologue roars on.

"I told her she never should've married that guy. Long as they was living together, everything was hunky-dory. But once she married him, that was it. He starts beating on her, see." She raises a fist as broad as a new cement block. "I don't know why anybody'd want to get married. Before my daughter got hitched to that guy, he never laid a hand on her," she says. "That slip of paper is all they need to think they own you."

I looked up at her mirror at the very second she gunned her eyes up at me, so I shrugged my shoulders when she looked for my reaction. I wasn't up to a fight with her.

"You think I'm lying?" she says. "Marriage is an institution, all right."

Now I see that her story is meant as a parable for the two cow-eyed students snuggling up to each other across the aisle. I could take her on, of course—give her a lecture on compassionate and nurturing marriage—but I've got only six blocks to go. "Whatever you say," I tell her.

“Now, you take my boyfriend,” she says. “I love that man, all right, but I don’t think I’ll marry him. I’d sure as anything move in with him, but I won’t marry him. No, sirree.”

Somewhere in this city, I’m thinking, there’s a man who’s fearfully and wonderfully blessed.

“Trouble is, he won’t move in with me, see?” she says. “He’s a sweetheart of a guy, and I just love him to death, I’ll tell you.”

I can’t lose now, I figure. We’re a block from my stop. “He won’t move in with you?” I ask the mirror.

“Nope,” she says, shaking her head as if it’s just unheard of.

The gravel cracks when we get to the place where I’ll step off the bus. She hits the brakes as if she wants every single passenger front and center on a dime.

“Why won’t he?” I say, shouldering a bag full of books as I get to my feet. The young-and-in-love stand too, equally interested.

She tips back her hat and squints right up at me standing there at the front of the bus. “He’s too stinking religious,” she says, cranking the door open for us to leave. “Have a nice day now, you hear?”

Once my car’s heater throws out warm air, I start to think about this December cowgirl and her too-

religious sweetheart. And here's what I come up with: the strange thing about her story is nothing more or less than the miracle of the incarnation. Even the overweight, obnoxious, promiscuous, over-the-hill cowgirl bus driver somehow plays host to the parasite power of the Word-made-flesh, who is working in her too, even today, through a boyfriend with saintly scruples. It's as if Christ wants her, even if no one else on the bus does, and even if she's not so hot on him.

The miracle of the incarnation is that Christ himself pulled on a suit of human flesh and laid himself down in a barn, all for the likes of us—the cowgirl bus driver, in all her ribald excesses, and her arrogant passenger, the distinguished professor with all his button-down sophistication. For the publican and the Pharisee.

He's come to us, for us. He's come—amazingly, shockingly—because he loves us.

That's the startling joy of Christmas.