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The Town Beneath the Christmas Tree

Jimmy's Christmas Present

Twisted Family Holidays Series:

Twisted Family Holidays Collection

Good Friday: Dreams and Nightmares

The Seers: The Seers: Love and Terror on the Fourth of July

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The Town Around the Christmas Tree: Jacob's Message

IN PASSING

JR WIRTH



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In Passing is dedicated to the family and friends who've
believed in me and have supported me through the writing
and publishing process.



PROLOGUE

All souls are tortured, Mary Elizabeth Stroll considered, as she turned down a private drive that led to the Catholic church's main sanctuary, and was cleverly named Our Damascus. She rolled the car to a stop, and then stared out the front window while she continued her extended thought. To what degree depends on how we are treated by those who surround us; and, I would imagine, what predicaments our decisions, good or bad, land us in. Even those who dance around in church, or who wave to the heavens while worship songs fill the air, all have tortured pasts; many have lasted into the present. No one is immune to evil or angst, but some cope better than others, and giving one's fate to Christ Jesus must be a relief to them. I, however, had no choice in the matter. My tattered soul was destined for confrontation long ago and, in my dreams, I suppose, redemption.

Hearing the beeping of a trash truck backing out of the parish parking lot, Mary shook her head and returned from her distant thoughts. “Redemption, huh,” she whispered. “I wonder where that thought originated?” She then wiggled her nose and repeated, “Redemption, redemption, redemption; what happens when we get redeemed? We get emotional revenge, I suppose.” Mary paused, briefly considering her latest thought. She then snapped her fingers. “Or, perhaps we get salvation, and a new perspective. Hey, I may be on to something.” Mary paused and bit her lip. Then, to the steering wheel of the Toyota Prius, she whispered, “The long dark night of light. It was definitely dark, that’s for damn sure.” With the engine still

running, she again paused and gave a quick, anxious glance at shadowy movements through the windshield. The rushed-panic shocked her senses, while her eyes moved back-and-forth, like frantic wipers in a nor'easter. Mary checked the surrounding area three times before her head completed a half-turn. Not seeing anything lurking in the shadows, Mary turned her attention to an elderly couple taking pictures of the church grounds. Feeling no threat, she breathed out a relieved sigh and continued her whispered dialogue. "It still seems to capture the essence of that night, and of my life for that matter. I think I may have found my title."

Mary removed the cap to her bottled water and took a sip. She tilted her head and examined the smooth plastic container then silently smirked. *What a gimmick*, she thought, *taking nature's runoff and putting it into a bottle for mass sales. The profit must be enormous.* Mary shook her head and smirked once again. She then took another sip and twisted the cap back on. She placed the bottle in the middle cup holder, and defiantly whispered, "Not important."

Mary engaged the parking brake of her rented, energy-efficient vehicle, and then placed both hands on the steering wheel. Sighing, she whispered, "Faded memories of a dark life's past." She turned off the engine and puffed, "That's what it is." Then, with a slight shake of her head, Mary took a halfhearted cleansing breath and let her hands meekly drop to her lap. *What if it never really happened*, she thought, *and I dreamt the whole wretched thing?*

Mary's head fell forward. She closed her eyes while her mind wandered, remembering when the nightmare began. *Why there?* she thought, picturing the faded, mustard-yellow home that her mother bought shortly after the divorce from Mary's father. The paint's discoloration more closely resembled the bottom of a freshly-soiled diaper than the face

of a welcoming home. The landscaping, furthermore, had been neglected for years; if, that is, it ever existed.

Mary shook her head in disgust, whispering, "Of all places, why that rundown house? Father had plenty of money to help us get a better place. Was Mother that proud and obstinate that she wouldn't take his money? But, then again, why didn't I say something?"

Suddenly, and without prompting, Mary's mind's eye abruptly and intrusively shifted scenes, causing her to jump and grab her chest to regain her breath. "I thought I was through with the invasive thoughts," she said, trying to distract herself from the new memory. It was too late, however; the stream of unwanted thoughts was in motion. Mary now watched herself as a child, being greeted by her mom's new boyfriend. As an observer in the daydream, she watched her mom's boyfriend exit the passenger-side door of the barely-running Ford Thunderbird.

"Come here and give your uncle a big hug," he said, making sure to lift the petite, twelve-year-old girl up by the buttocks. Then, while in his arms, Mary could see, and feel, his clandestine, callused hands roaming and squeezing inappropriately.

"What a bastard," Mary barked. "I wonder how many girls he did that to before me?" Mary's face cringed at the recollection. "Enter the beast," she whispered. "It is real. With this reaction, after all this time, it has to be real, doesn't it?"

Then, in a moment of distraction, she chuckled. "The Beast. Really, is that the best you can do, Mary? You had so many better names for him than that."

Mary removed her large black sunglasses. She used both hands to cover and wipe her face. She then closed her eyes and ran her fingers along her forehead. Stopping at her temples, Mary massaged the fleshy area to stop the flow of

negative thoughts, and to fight off the overwhelming anxiety and depression that always accompanied her self-doubt. Moving her fingers in a circular motion, she chanted, "It wasn't a dream; it wasn't a dream; it wasn't a dream." The idea that the night which had changed her life could have been nothing more than a dream, or hallucination, was one Mary had often wrestled with, yet always dismissed. To allow those types of thoughts to enter her psyche would mean that she'd have to negate the previous nine years of her life, and the events of that night, as well as all the events that led up to it.

"Lord, give me strength," Mary said, placing her glasses back on. She then reached for the Panasonic digital voice recorder that rested on the passenger seat. She sighed at the routine that had been reenacted a thousand times before. In fact, so much time and energy had been spent in the documentation of her recollections that Mary wondered if she'd ever have a life again.

"Nearly a million children are abused in this country every year," Mary said, talking into the hidden microphone of her electronic best friend. She glanced at the steering wheel, and then back at the recorder, quickly blurting, "Wait! Opening paragraph."

Mary paused, collecting her thoughts. Then, for recording's sake, she repeated, "Faded memories of a dark life's past. End thought." She delicately pushed the stop button and rested the recorder against her forehead. Then, shaking her head, she gazed out the window. "No, that's not it," she whispered, momentarily watching several perky sparrows dance between treetops.

Mary looked at her notes. "Ah ha." She glanced back at the handheld device and, with deliberate urgency, pressed record. "According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, it is estimated that over six hundred and

ninety thousand children were abused in the United States in the year 2008.”

Still looking at her notes, Mary took a deep, beleaguered breath. Letting it out, she continued. “That was referenced from the web address, www-dot-acf-dot-hhs-dot-gov. The actual number of afflicted children, however, could be much, much more. Who knows how many kids are tormented at the hands of trusted adults?”

Mary stopped recording.

Placing the device back on the passenger seat, she peeked out the right-side window. *That looks awfully familiar*, she thought, viewing Saint Andrew’s Cathedral. The majestic Catholic Church sat in a bountiful garden countryside. Surrounded by trees, flowers and lush green shrubbery, the building was a sight worth seeing. Mary again removed her sunglasses, carefully placing them on her lap. She retrieved her digital camera from the oversized handbag that sat on the floorboard. Mary leaned over the passenger seat and pointed the camera, capturing a digital image of the church and grounds. Holding the camera away from her face, she checked the viewing screen. “Sweet.”

Satisfied with the photo, Mary smiled. “I know just where I’ll put this one.” She laid the camera next to the recorder and leaned forward. Looking up through the windshield, she placed her sunglasses back on and admired the rich blueness of the early summer, morning sky. Her smile widened. “Nice!” Mary then engaged the car’s engine to power down the windows while she finished her verbal notes.

Watching the window descend, Mary again became distracted by nature’s beauty. Tilting her head out the window, she closed her eyes and inhaled the aroma of freshly-cut grass, while she bathed in the light breeze that gently tickled the abundant landscape.

Returning from her mental break, Mary quickly looked at her watch. "Ten minutes," she whispered. She took another deep breath to counter the anxious anticipation of the meeting that would occur shortly. This time she let her breath slowly seep out until her lungs were completely emptied. "Perfect."

Looking up, Mary pulled down the visor and viewed her reflection in the mirror. She checked her streaked, sandy blonde hair, and then her make-up. The subtle green and brown colors accented her light-green eyes. "Good enough," she whispered.

Mary glanced back at her jumbled notes, carefully forming the next thought she would put into a voice imprint. She was setting the groundwork for the first of what she hoped would be a string of novels. Having read nearly a book a week since the age of five, Mary knew she had a place in the publishing industry. But as an aspiring author, she also knew how hard it was to break into the field, especially finding an agent who would even take the time to look at her manuscript. Nevertheless, she was determined to tell her story, and another chapter, perhaps the last, was about to unfold in a matter of minutes.

If she couldn't break the publishing barrier, Mary was content with being a journalist and devoted wife, as well as a great mother to the five children she hoped to someday have. And if for some reason she could not find her true love, Mary would use her journalistic skills to expose the widespread evils of child abuse.

Mary sat back in her seat. She re-engaged the recorder, continuing to decipher the handwritten, sloppy notes that were written the night before, during her second and third glasses of Shiraz in the hotel lobby bar. "The website," she said, "also indicated that nine-point-one percent, or, sixty-two thousand, seven hundred and ninety-

five, of those children were known to have been sexually abused.”

Mary shuffled through her notes to find the napkin that was used to scribble down the last of the vital statistics needed for her first draft. Continuing, she said, “And familyfirstaid-dot-org reported that in 2001, one-thousand, eight hundred and eighty-three youths between the ages of ten and nineteen successfully committed suicide. That roughly translates into five deaths per day, or nearly one youth suicide death every four-and-a-half hours.”

Frowning, Mary sighed and shook her head again. She then stopped recording and gazed down. Looking at the steering wheel, she smirked and, fading toward the memory of that night, softly said, “I wonder how many are sexually abused while they’re killing themselves?”