

A Christmas Story

Written by Bernie Moscovitz

Our editor Margaret Evans' wonderful piece in the last issue, about the locked church doors, released a special Christmas story from the depths of my memory. I always saw it as a kind of gift and it's in that spirit I offer it to our readers.

It was Christmas Eve, 1975, in Orangeville, Ontario, a tiny town about 80 minutes north of Toronto, where the people who would later become my parents-in-law had their country cottage getaway. It was, in fact, a one room schoolhouse of 1940s vintage, turned into one of the most welcoming places I've ever been. The area was still remote: farm fields with Norman Rockwell fences; mildly rolling hillocks; a one-street town with facades more reminiscent of the old American West than United Empire Loyalist Ontario. A while after dinner, someone suggested we go for a walk and three of us did – she who later became my wife, her wonderful mother and me.

For those of you who haven't seen the perfection of winter, imagine this: Newly-fallen powder snow, white as... well, snow; temperature around 25 but with no wind and no dampness; crispy crunch of snow boots along a quiet country road and a clear, navy-blue sky with silver stars and a golden moon lighting that piece of the world as if it were a stage set, and all of it enveloped in resplendent silence.

About 20 minutes up the road and along a little curve, its slightly crooked steeple glinting in the moonlight, was a tiny church. No name, no signpost, the snow completely covering the path to its doors. I turned toward those doors and remember a little reluctance from those ladies in my life... perhaps it was no longer a church and was now someone's private country house... but I continued on, shin deep in snow and yes, *these* church doors were unlocked.

The three of us went inside. It looked unused but not in disrepair; a very simple, un-ornate place ...a few rows of pews; a small altar; tall, plain windows that let in enough light so we could see and, over on the left, an old wooden organ with one of those turntable-round piano stools.

I'd had a couple of years of piano lessons as a kid but was never very good at it. I walked over to that antique and discovered it was a pump organ, requiring ceaseless action on two large pedals that whooshed air into some kind of bellows that, somehow, allowed the music to emerge.

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I took off my coat and gloves, sat down and, with an expertise that came from a place I still cannot fathom, played “O Holy Night” without fault; the incredible transition from its basic major key to the stunning E minor of the “Fall on your knees” part resonating in the pure acoustics of that empty-but-for- us sanctuary . It was a moment in time. We left that little church as we found it, walked back home, had some hot cocoa and all went to sleep.

As the years ensued, a sort of ritual was created: If my mother-in-law and I were in the same place on Christmas eve, we’d try to get to some midnight service to listen to the music, just the two of us: the Jew who’d become her son-in-law and the Anglican woman who didn’t go to Church a lot.

I have never thought that the experience was out of context with me being a part of the Jewish people. I have found it easy to accept the spirit of Christmas and all the good and love it proclaims while not altering who or what I am.

I haven’t got the expertise or the knowledge to know if the “spirit moved me” or not on that night so long ago. All I know is that there was a road and a church and an organ and music that came out the ends of my fingers. I leave the rest for God to know and I wish each and every one of you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

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